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ABSTRACT

In response to public concern over the effects of television commercials on children, the Federal Trade Commission formulated regulatory proposals that would ban certain advertising from children's television and regulate advertising intended for the eight year old to the eleven year old age group. However, in the light of two recent research studies, it is important to reassess the tendency of parents to relegate, and for regulatory bodies to assume, parental responsibilities for the consumer socialization of children. The first study indicated that mother-child interaction does influence the child's development of such consumer-related skills as product awareness, comparison, and evaluation. Based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development, the second study revealed that preschool children possess a sophisticated ability to understand the nature and purpose of television commercials and are able to discern commercial content from program content. Based on this research, efforts to increase parental involvement in the consumer socialization of their children provide a more realistic and potentially more effective solution for regulating children's television viewing than control through regulatory agencies. (MAI)

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REGULATING CHILDREN'S TELEVISION ADVERTISING: REASSESSING PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

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REGULATING CHILDREN'S TELEVISION ADVERTISING:

REASSESSING PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

In the area of the child/television advertising relationship, both governmental regulatory agencies and various self-regulatory bodies are reacting to a perceived public concern over the effects of television commercials on children. Regulatory proposals have recently been formulated by the Federal Trade Commission in response to such concern that would 1) ban all television advertising from programs seen by substantial audiences of children under age 8 because they are too young to understand the selling intent of commercials; 2) ban television advertising of sugary foods that pose a dental health risk from programs seen by significant numbers of children between ages 8 and 11; and 3) allow continued television advertising of less hazardous sugared foods to the 8 to 11-year-old group, but only if individual food advertisers fund balancing nutritional disclaimers.[1] Critics argue that these proposals do not go far enough; advertisers argue that these proposals are too restrictive (1, 4, 5, 9, 10).

While many of the arguments presented "for" or "against" the practice of advertising to children differ and others overlap, most interested parties tend to agree that more indepth and reliable research data is needed as a basis for valid and effective regulation (3, 8). Judging from the

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[1]See FTC's Staff Report on Children's Television Advertising, 1978.

Commission's recent activities, however, regulations will be forthcoming whether hard empirical proof of the actual need for such regulations exist or not. After eight years of consumerist complaints about the effects of television commercials on children, this observation is certainly supported by Chairman Michael Pertschuk's successful effort at quickly getting the children's ad program before the Commission.

This paper was not undertaken, or presumptuous enough, to attempt to resolve the question of empirical need or the regulatory controversy surrounding the practice of advertising to children. Rather the purpose is to comment on the need for all interested groups, including regulatory bodies, to consider the implications of recent research by Reid (11) and Wackman, Wartella, and Ward (13) concerning the impact of parental involvement on children's ability to understand television advertising. These studies are particularly important because they move beyond the age deterministic view of most research (11), suggesting that parents play a potentially major role in children's consumer learning as previously suggested by other researchers (1). They suggest a reassessment of the tendency for parents to relegate, and for regulatory bodies to assume, parental responsibilities of consumer education. The findings of the studies are briefly summarized in the following section. Subsequent sections comment on recent regulatory directions and discuss the desirability of involving parents more directly in the process of consumer socialization.

NEW RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Like other studies conducted by Ward and his associates, the Wackman, Wartella, and Ward study (13) was based on Piaget's theory of cognitive development. It was assumed that young children develop from "perceptually

narrow information decoders" in their earliest consumer acts to "abstract and broad information processors" by early adolescence. Contrary to this expectation, however, children, at any age-graded stage of cognitive development, were found to possess the potential ability to learn various consumer-related skills. Rather than chronological age, mother-child interaction was found to be the most significant contributing factor to children's consumer skill acquisition. Specifically, mother-child interaction was found to influence the following skills: 1) awareness of performance characteristics of products; 2) awareness of sources of information; 3) understanding of television commercials; 4) awareness of various brands; and 5) use of physical and functional attributes of brand comparison. Although it was reported that most mothers do not attempt to teach consumer-related skills, the research suggests that parental supervision and other types of parent-child interaction and communication are important in children learning to understand television advertising.

Reid (11) attempted to move beyond survey research (i.e., self-administered interview schedules and parental observations) by observing children's interactional experience with television advertising while actually situated in front of the family's television set. To measure the impact of family group interaction on children's understanding of television advertising, nine family groups, with varying consumer teaching orientations, were ordered in a 3 x 3 observational design. The children observed ranged in age from three to eleven.

The preschool children under study displayed surprising sophistication in their ability to understand the nature and purpose of television commercials, contrary to age-graded accounts of such cognitive ability. While such

sophistication was more pronounced in a preschool child from a high consumer-oriented household, the other preschool children included in the sample displayed similar abilities.

Rather than being cognitively unsophisticated viewers, Reid suggests that preschoolers have the potential ability to differentiate television programming and commercials through their ability to interpret content in relation to social experiences and to act toward commercials in terms of such understanding. This indicates that a child's ability to handle television advertising is a product of family group interaction and those experiences that he carries to the viewing situation, not biologically determined age-graded stages of cognitive development. Television viewing was observed to be an interactive phenomena through which a child in participation with others produces and assigns social meaning to television commercials. To attempt a blanket conceptualization of the child/television advertising relationship, then, based on chronologically age-fixed stages ignores the potential impact of social interaction, especially family group interaction.

At the risk of over-simplification, both studies suggest a "common ground" for focusing all energies directed at regulating children's television advertising. Rather than perpetuating a series of monologues among the various groups advocating their positions and points of interest concerning the issue, the findings advance parental involvement as a point of dialogue for the advancement of common good (2). Having reviewed this research and its apparent implication, the focus now turns to the current state of regulating children's television advertising.

REASSESSING PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITY

A recurring problem concerning the regulation of children's television advertising is the lack of dialogue among advertisers, special interest groups, government regulators, and members of the general public, as the various groups seem to talk past each other concerning the many complexities of the issue. At one extreme, it is suggested that all advertising directed toward children be eliminated, and directed only to parents. At the other extreme, it is argued that parent's exercise control over their children's viewing and must share the blame for any ills that follow. To resolve the controversy, all groups seem to agree, however, that the matter should be handled by governmental agencies and are receptive to the idea of applying consumer behavior research data to proposed regulatory codes and policies (7, 14).

This general consensus indicates a great faith in the power and effectiveness of legislative or regulatory decision making concerning the child/television advertising relationship. Because the problem area is broad and ill defined, it is tacitly assumed that by turning over responsibility to regulatory agencies, only those practices that are in the public's best interest will remain (12). Denzin labels this trend the politics of education and socialization and has observed (6, p. 328):

> American families are painfully retarded in the stances they have taken towards children, education, the juvenile courts, the welfare programs, and drug abuse programs. They have permitted large-scale bureaucratic systems of social control to take over what is their responsibility: seeing to it that children receive the best possible care education.

With the growing acceptance of behavioral data into the existing regulatory process and the continuing trend toward complex set of agencies and

organizations to handle public policy issues, what is suggested above is a continuing tendency to view governmental regulation as the ultimate and sole solution to issues concerning the child/television advertising relationship. Perhaps more important, this tendency further suggests that parents, in their attempts to produce better children, have relegated their responsibilities of child care and education to the political system; and these responsibilities, in turn, have been and are still being, carried out through regulatory codes and policies (6, p. 4).

The data reported by Reid (11) and Wackman, Wartella, and Ward (13) suggest that regulating children's television advertising is not an area of public policy in which governmental regulation can provide the only effective solution, however. Rather than attempting to protect children from television commercials, which, of course, would be impossible, efforts should be made to prepare children to handle it. As suggested by their data, increased parent-child interaction concerning television advertising can improve a child's ability to deal with television commercials, including a preschool child's ability. In the broadest sense, the data reinforce the idea that consumer education can work as a viable supplement to governmental regulation, especially that undertaken by parents. Moreover, such education need not be based on age differences as suggested by initial research assuming the cognitive developmental perspective.

More parental involvement can occur only if more parents are made aware of the potential impact that they might have on their children's consumer development, however. Rather than attempting to prevent children from being exposed to television advertising by eliminating all commercials from children's programming, all concerned bodies, including regulatory agencies,

consumer groups, the advertising industry, the school system, and the general public, ought to become more involved in teaching children to understand the nature and purpose of television advertising. To eliminate the practice will not solve the problem because children are heavy viewers of prime time programming and will merely shift more viewing time from daytime and Saturday mornings to prime time (e.g. 1/4 of early childhood viewing is prime time according to A. C. Nielsen Data). Direct line of accountability between parents and consumer education must be established to solve the problem. Rather than continuing to seek conflicting and separate solutions, all groups concerned must seek to establish such a line of accountability as their common goal.

Schools, for example, could establish direct lines by designing preschool curricula that includes consumer education. Such a program would go beyond the traditional student-teacher relationship by bringing parents into the program by involving them as active and interacting participants. In conjunction with curricula changes, parents, as members of the general public, could seek to supplement formal consumer education programs. Through groups, such as the PTA, parents could encourage and supplement formal programs that involve them in their children's consumer development. The advertising industry itself could contribute by providing information about parental impact on children's consumer development through such organizations as the Advertising Council. Governmental agencies could supplement industry provided information through informational campaigns of its own. Consumer groups, such as Action for Children's Television, could redirect their efforts toward attempts to encourage parents to become more involved in children's consumer learning, rather than attempting to control through increased governmental

regulation, only one of the many agencies of consumer socialization. These are only a few of many suggestions that might be voiced. The major point remains, however, that consumer education can work and all energies must be directed toward involving parents in children's consumer development, including their ability to understand television advertising.

Rather than turning all of their responsibilities over to governmental agencies, parents, as the most immediate caretakers of children, must assert their obligations in regard to consumer socialization. They must resist pressures to move the child out of the family arena into bureaucratic regulatory settings (6). The business of producing a "marketplace-wise" consumer is a serious business, and parents must become more involved in the process of consumer socialization. Other groups concerned should push parents in this direction.

CONCLUSION

While no large-scale, detailed plans or programs are offered for involving parents in consumer teaching activities, and even if parental teaching is currently a "hit-or-miss" proposition, the major implication of recent research calls for increased parental involvement in teaching children, especially preschool children, to understand the nature and purpose of television advertising. It is time for all interested groups to stop looking to the regulatory system as the sole solution to public policy issues. Parents must become actively involved in the consumer socialization process and their involvement must be recognized and systematically incorporated into the public policy decision making process. Any form of continuing governmental oversight--however well intended--will be a further encroachment on parental responsibility and will not solve the fundamental problem. At the

same time, however, the consequences of the child/television advertising relationship are both real and of great importance to the process of consumer socialization. Recent research suggests that increased parent-child interaction concerning television advertising perhaps provides a more realistic and potentially more effective solution for those who wish to regulate the viewing habits and consumer development of children, including preschool children.

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